

Wake

The women are in one room, the men
in another. Zio Crescenzo died
three hours ago. The Women line
the walls of the living room, the
only light comes from a candle on top
of the television set. The women
are all wearing black, only their hands
and their faces are visible. Some
of them have always worn black, there
were seven children and they started
dying forty years ago.

The men are sitting in rows of chairs
lining the walls of the kitchen.
The sons are crying with their heads
buried in their arms. We kiss each
one, their faces are burning.

In the living room the women have begun
to wail and scream as though they were
possessed by demons or death itself.
Later on, in the middle of the night
it will become a chanting.

I stay in the room with the men.
I know that this will happen
only a few times more, that
the children's children
are already forgetting the language,
we will not know how to chant and wail.
I will be the first with a more
well-mannered grief. I am the first
to think in English.

I look at the buried faces
and I think in English
how death is the mother of beauty,
I hear the bone-piercing chants
and I wonder in English about rites
and drama, the birth of music
out of death, the long way we've come
to the well-mannered sorrows.

My mother has begun to wail his goodness
and his pain, how he sold his only shoes
to feed his starving children, how God
had taken away his words and half his body
in a hospital where there were no priests.

Another one dead and she still cries
the pain of his life for the whole night,
and tomorrow the men will hold the women
back from the graveside, grip them strongly
to keep them from jumping in. I will never know
what she learned from this or the others:

Salvatore, found in a ditch
in Argentina with a knife in his back
Stefano, axed to death
over some Calabrian point of honour
Tommasino, who made it big in America
and died a silent lonely American death
Vincenzo, who died the barbaric
death of cancer

The women will cry until the chant
is broken and one of them collapses.
Then the men will enter and try to help.
But the cries and chants begin again,
hoarse and hollow, until more family arrives
and the cries grow fresh and louder.
And in the middle of the night
cousins will drive down in Pontiacs
from the suburbs, with hot coffee
which they will serve in demi-tasses.

—Rosario d'Agostino